Canterbury Christ Church University/MPS

Neighbourhood policing in the MPS – 8 April 2022

By Arditti, R. (MPS) and Blackburn, B., Bryant, R. & Lewis, H. (all Canterbury Christ Church University).

The report represents the views of the authors' and not necessarily those of Canterbury Christ Church University or the MPS.

1. Introduction

This report provides a summary of the outcomes of a research project conducted in the Summer / Autumn 2021 which aimed to evaluate the level of understanding of neighbourhood policing within the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and compare this to the service delivery offered by the force.

As part of the research, we conducted focus group interviews with MPS Police Constables, Police Sergeants, Police Inspectors and a 'mixed group' of Police Chief Inspectors and Superintendents. Interviewees were either from Neighbourhood Policing Teams or carried responsibility for neighbourhood policing in the MPS. These lasted approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using NVivo software. We also interviewed a cross-section of the Chairs of London's Safer Neighbourhood Boards (SNBs), all members of the public. We undertook a separate interview with the MPS lead for neighbourhood policing, Commander Dr Alison Heydari. Finally we also interviewed Deputy Chief Constable Claire Parmenter, NPCC national portfolio lead for neighbourhood policing to gain a national perspective.

In the report we have used abbreviations when citing evidence from the focus groups. These are: PSCO - Focus Group interviews with PCSOs; PC - Focus Group interviews with Police Constables with neighbourhood policing responsibilities; SGT - Focus Group interviews with Police Sergeants with neighbourhood policing responsibilities; INS - Focus Group interviews with Police Inspectors with neighbourhood policing responsibilities; CINS - Focus Group interviews with Chief Inspectors and Superintendents with neighbourhood policing responsibilities; SNB - Focus Group interviews with Chairs of London Safer Neighbourhood Boards.

Ethics approval to undertake the research was granted by Canterbury Christ Church University (application ETH2021-0319), in consultation with the MPS.

2. Neighbourhood policing policy and guidelines

As part of this research, we undertook a literature review of neighbourhood policing policy and guidelines. This involved sampling academic papers concerned with neighbourhood policing, HMICFRS PEEL reports, as well as government and police advice on effective neighbourhood policing. This review was then used to identify key areas for questioning with the focus groups.

The modern concept of 'neighbourhood policing' was articulated by Sir Ian Blair in a speech in 2005, with the express aims of improving public confidence and boosting police legitimacy. Within the speech Blair highlighted the need to avoid 'the cycle of reinvention of community policing', pledging to avoid the pitfalls of past experience where police officers and staff were deployed onto patrol 'with much fanfare' only for the public to witness the recalling of these officers as other demands on policing became more pressing. Blair noted the adverse effect on community confidence that resulted from this persistent cyclic 'reinvention'. It was envisioned instead that well-resourced, funded and directed neighbourhood teams would offer a permanent public presence and officers would only be diverted from closely defined and 'ringfenced' activities in 'the direst of emergencies'. Under the model outlined by Blair, neighbourhood policing was designed to last and would not be prey to outside demands or be reversed, for example, in the face of rising crime.

It is clear that engagement remains a key aspect of the neighbourhood policing role to this day, with meaningful contact with the public identified within the literature as the best way to influence changes within the community and to protect the vulnerable (see HMICFRS PEEL reports). However, the literature also suggests that the 'Blair model' of a dedicated and protected role for neighbourhood policing with an explicit and clear focus on community engagement has not endured. There is, for example, evidence of the more 'proactive' forms of neighbourhood policing falling behind reactive 'crime fighting' styles of policing in terms of resourcing and organisational priority. The role of neighbourhood policing officers has also certainly expanded over time through the adding of tasks to the role that are only tangentially associated with the core concepts of community engagement and problem solving. In some ways, this represents a return to the 'cycle of reinvention' that neighbourhood policing was supposed to avoid.

In their guidelines for chief officers, the CoP outline their current take on neighbourhood policing. Within these guidelines, there remains the core concept of community engagement (see section 1 of the CoP supporting material for senior leaders). While the guidelines allow flexibility and scope for local innovation, there is a lack of specific guidance on *how* to achieve these goals. When compared with earlier descriptions of how neighbourhood teams would engage with local communities, there is little substance here to guide police policy and practice. This is true across the literature, with HMICFRS, CoP, MOPAC and Police Vision all offering descriptions of neighbourhood policing that include community engagement, but little in the way of concrete advice on how this is to be organised, or success measured.

There is however, some consistency within the literature with regard to the core activities of neighbourhood teams, particularly in relation to preventing crime, problem solving and building relationships with the community. For example, 'problem-oriented policing', 'crime

prevention' and 'targeted patrols' are given by the CoP as examples of duties for the neighbourhood team. Additional activities such as managing organised crime groups and sex offenders, intelligence gathering, improving the reporting of crime, reducing fear of crime and online engagement are also highlighted as key roles for neighbourhood officers in the PEEL reports (HMICFRS 2017, 2018, 2019). It should be noted that some of these neighbourhood policing activities have also been highlighted in the annual PEEL reports as areas requiring improvement, with austerity-based cuts in police numbers and changes to service delivery seen as key factors in reducing performance (Barber, 2022). Refocusing police resources on response policing have also been identified as a common problem for neighbourhood teams within the literature, with improvement targets given year on year to reduce how often officers are abstracted away from their neighbourhood duties (HMIC PEEL report for MPS 2017, HMIC National PEEL report 2017, HMICFRS National PEEL reports 2018 and 19).

The latest CoP guidelines on neighbourhood policing provide guidance on how 'safer neighbourhood teams' should operate. However, some commentators have argued this new guidance can be seen as too 'crime-centric', with little advice given on how to foster community relations and build legitimacy. Recently, the Police Foundation (Barber) have gone so far as to suggest that the CoP approach fundamentally changes neighbourhood policing, pushing it more towards crime and disorder and away from community engagement. If true, this would be in line with published policing plans (Policing Vison 2025, MOPAC Policing Vision 2022-25). Either way, it is certainly the case that there is little reference within the CoP guidelines as to how neighbourhood teams should build legitimacy and trust in the police, beyond 'making local areas safer'. Overall, the new guidelines probably do represent a significant shift in the focus of neighbourhood teams, relocating them within the remit of demand rather than prevention and outreach, as was the original vision.

From the literature it is therefore clear that neighbourhood policing is currently being pulled in several different directions at once. Neighbourhood teams are becoming increasingly associated with crime and disorder reduction (see MOPAC 2022, Policing Vision 2022-25 and CoP guidelines) and less directed on community engagement and legitimacy building. Yet at the same time, annual measures continue to assess neighbourhood teams on their ability to engage meaningfully with the local community. It is likely that until recently that the 'core doctrine' of building legitimacy and community trust through neighbourhood policing had been eroded by reduced policing numbers (for example, in the MPS the change of organisational structure from Borough to BCU changed the staffing model of one PS, two PCs, three PCSOs per ward to just two PCs and one PCSO per ward). The recent uplift in police officer numbers (with an additional planned 600 new neighbourhood police officers in London alone) might provide an opportunity to redress some of the balance, back towards community engagement whilst at the same recognising the changing demands on police time and resources. Further the current 'crisis in legitimacy' facing the MPS will inevitably place further emphasis on the neighbourhood officers to engage effectively.

3. **Purpose of neighbourhood policing in the MPS**

A key intention of this research was to understand what 'neighbourhood policing' means to different parts of the MPS. We were unable to locate a 'mission statement' for the Met's Neighbourhood teams. However, our review of neighbourhood policing policy and guidelines

(see section 2 earlier) provided us with a context to frame questions to each of the focus groups / interviewees to assess what neighbourhood policing meant to them.

Neighbourhood policing, to the PCSOs, was about being a visible presence in the community, building long-term relationships and dealing with local issues - such as anti-social behaviour drugs, homelessness, 'rough-sleepers' – often in conjunction with the local authority (PCSO). Although the neighbourhood policing role had grown more recently to accommodate the use of social media, fundamentals remained the same (PCSO). This group arguably had the clearest conception of what neighbourhood policing meant to them – perhaps because their role had remained the most consistent over time.

In contrast, the DWO focus group suggested that their role had grown and changed considerably over time (PC). They pointed to the change of staffing model that accompanied the move from borough policing to the BCU model. There was widespread agreement that neighbourhood policing in the MPS had moved away from being locally focused to being a support function to other departments. They pointed to the level of tasking from other units ranging from arrest warrants to border force intelligence checks. Of note was that only one person said that combating violence was a key part of their role. No one mentioned confidence building measures such as outreach. They did, however, highlight the increased administration associated with broadening of their role (this view was also repeated in other focus groups, particularly by the Chief Inspectors and Superintendents, CINS). For example, one DWO said:

> *Yes spreadsheets, yes. Spreadsheet after spreadsheet for the sake of a spreadsheet and returns, all different returns, the same returns on a different spreadsheet… and it's not like spreadsheets that last for years, they come about a month and then they are forgotten about, or we are asked not to do them again* (PC)*.*

The sergeants and inspectors shared similar views that neighbourhood policing should focus upon solving problems and building engagement (SGT, INS). One person harked back to the '*old fashioned bobby on the beat'*. Another stressed building confidence because '*a lot of other departments don't get an opportunity to build up those relationships with the community*…" While their views about neighbourhood policing were relatively clear, it was very apparent that they thought these views were not shared by others outside of the strand and were constantly being challenged. One inspector said there is: '[…] *so much confusion over what is expected of them* [their teams] *that they have lost direction and they just see themselves as mopping up other people's mess and trying to do their own roles as well*..' (CINS).

This was also emphasised by the Chief Inspectors and Superintendents, one saying:

> *'I feel like we have too many masters, there are too many people with specific portfolios who think they can just task neighbourhoods with their thing without realising that everybody else is doing the same thing and some of them contradict each other and some of them are starting to take us down the route of taking us, of diluting*

us I think and you know every task that they give us to do takes our ward officers away from their priorities' (CINS).

Both sergeants, inspectors and Chief Inspectors / Superintendents lamented the reduction in staff associated with the BCU model (SGT, CINS). This, they thought lessened their ability to make an impact. They also noted the lack of training and impact of probationer rotations, both of which had the effect of diluting the understanding of the PCs about the perceived fundamentals of neighbourhood policing. Interestingly, their understanding of neighbourhood policing focused much more on the long-term problem-solving elements of the concept, rather than enforcement. The Chief Inspectors / Superintendents were particularly concerned around the potential tension between engagement and enforcement (INS). There was a clear view that Neighbourhoods is the only strand with the clear opportunity to engage directly with the community and, if necessary, this should take priority over enforcement.

The Chief Inspector and Superintendent focus group were particularly vocal about perceived ambiguity in the current understanding of neighbourhood policing in the MPS (CINS). They shared similar views to the PCSOs, PCs and Inspectors that the role of neighbourhood policing should be about engagement and building trust and confidence through long-term problem solving. However, there was wide ranging concern about how the concept is being implemented. One said '*what I believe neighbourhood policing to be is something other than is being manifest in the Met at the moment*.' Another said, "*the Met is quite confused about what it wants neighbourhoods to do.*' Another person said, '*I would suggest that we seem to pay lip service to SNT without fully embracing what we could be doing…we don't want to invest in it*.' Another participant claimed that '*engagement is just a buzz word…there is a real confusion around the key headlines and brand for what neighbourhood policing should be…*' Linked to this concern about the raison d'etre of neighbourhood policing was the lack of cross strand support and understanding. The participants stressed the difficulty of proving '*our worth…what we do is very difficult to quantify*.'

Most officers had a view that neighbourhood policing revolved around problem-solving and engagement. However, it was difficult to elicit more clarity from them about what this meant. The SNB chair focus group had more defined ideas (SNB). To them, neighbourhood policing is about having officers with some longevity in the role to really understand their ward or town centre. One said, '*should be about connection, ownership and continuity of policing in ward or borough as opposed to specialists coming in solving a crime looking at issues, it's about actually being embedded…and visible*.' Another said that officers should be 'culturally competent' so they '*know the peculiarities within the ward, they know what to expect so that when things that are not usual turn up they can easily identify it*.' Others stressed the need for a meaningful partnership between police and those stakeholders or community representatives.

The CoP guidelines does not explicitly define the purpose of neighbourhood policing. Nor has the MPS provided an organisational definition. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that none

of the focus groups provided a clear and explicit interpretation of the concept, perhaps except for the SNB chairs. There is a real sense that practitioners, particularly the PCSOs, DWOs and Sergeants, know they need to be in the community, engaging, and solving local problems. The Inspectors, Chiefs Inspectors and Superintendents appear to be struggling to create the space to allow their teams to do their jobs: difficulties in quantifying prevention, deterrence, engagement and reassurance, the lack of understanding within other parts of the organisation, cross-tasking, resourcing and training all appear to be having significant operational impact.

4. Community engagement

In general terms our research suggested the need to clarify more clearly what is meant by 'community engagement' in the context of neighbourhood policing in the MPS.

During our research, a number of issues were noted in relation to engaging with the community via ward panel meetings. The point was made by at least one focus group that as wards differ in size and levels and types of crime then the setting of priorities geographically across wards may not constitute the best approach (CINS). A fundamental question is therefore whether ward panels are, in the first instance, the best mechanism to help set MPS priorities. Could, for example, a better 'unit of measurement' be used? In any event, how should the success of ward panels be measured, if at all? Further, how should the MPS balance ward priorities, SNB priorities, Community Safety Partnership priorities, BCU priorities, MPS priorities and MOPAC priorities.

How the ward priorities were set seemed to be a source of confusion with some interviewees (PCSO, PC, SGT). In particular,what became apparent from all of the focus groups was the inconsistent approach to the setting of ward priorities, both in terms of the number and the nature of the priorities.   Wards had between three and six priorities and these were set in different ways - some after discussion with ward panel members only, some also chosen by officers and in some wards some were also directed by the MPS. As one focus group participant noted: *'… we end up having five kind of priorities really and five is quite a lot for one or two police officers to deal with as well as their day to day job of dealing with virtually anything that comes in'* (SGT). The type of priorities set was also an issue, being that some were rolling 'generalised' priorities for example anti-social behaviour or burglary, tied in with organisation wide MPS priorities. Evaluation and communication of the success of these was therefore perceived as a problematic.

The frequency of meetings and make up in terms of membership also appeared to some focus group participants to vary depending on the location of a ward. There is an issue about attracting enough members of the public to commit to attending regularly as the number of participants had dwindled in many BCUs particularly during the pandemic when meetings have moved online. Interviewees (PCSO, PC) referred to the problem of attracting members via letters and emails. For instance, once person said, '*I send about 3,500 emails out using various platforms and you get like five responses back so to gauge local community engagement can be difficult'* (PCSO).'

Interviewees also commented that it was difficult to attract members that fairly represented the diversity of the local populations in Greater London. One SNB chair comment, *'I mean who do you want to be represented in a ward panel in terms of diversity because you've actually got several if not a dozen distinct mix of ethnic groups, of interest groups or whatever it may be?'* (SNB). The Safer Neighbourhood Board Chairs group suggested that ensuring representation was also one of reflecting socio-economic status as much as diversity and there were difficulties in attracting members of the community who may not feel confident in joining a committee and speaking out (SNB).

The problem of retention of ward panel members was also highlighted by interviewees. One interviewee in the PC group commented that members often joined because of a particular challenge in their area and then left the panels once these challenges had been dealt with.

Technology was also seen as a barrier to engagement by some focus groups. Some ward panels have seen numbers decline due to switching from face to face to online meetings during the pandemic due to elderly people or people who aren't tech 'savvy' not joining meetings (PCSO). Face to face meetings, however are valued by police staff. For instance, a PCSO commented, *'what happens with the face to face is you build up a relationship with these people, you, while you are patrolling you see them, they become long term panel members so that's what we've lost in the pandemic.'* (PCSO).

5. Resourcing

A common thread through all focus groups were issues with resourcing. This discussion point echoed PEEL report findings that abstractions impacted neighbourhood teams significantly and reduced their effectiveness. The focus groups identified a number of ways that the uncertainty caused by regular abstraction affected the delivery of neighbourhood policing and influenced the day-to-day working of the officers. A lack of visibility in the community and a perceived inability for sergeants to prevent officers from being abstracted, meant that abstraction was felt to be a direct threat to the ability for the MPS to deliver neighbourhood policing (SNB, PS, PC, PCSO). One SNB chair commented, *'I think that they are very demoralised at the moment in terms of their inability to actually respond to what the community is asking them to deliver and so they walk around they have got very heavy shoulders at the moment because they are unable to deliver what they want to deliver'* (SNB).

In practical terms, abstraction meant that officers were not able to consistently patrol their wards and engage with partner agencies; both functions identified as core components of their jobs by the officers. Whilst officers (PCSO, PC, SGT) were able to point to areas where partner working was done well, it was felt that this could be considerably improved by ensuring officers were more consistently working in their local area. None of the groups interviewed were able to estimate the frequency of abstraction as this information was not collected for neighbourhood teams.

Some officers (PC) highlighted that the closure of London police stations and a lack of available cars meant that they spent a lot of time travelling to and from their wards. The MOPAC estate strategy states that 'neighbourhood officers are expected to be out on patrol' (MOPAC 2013 p.32), but our research indicates that the strategy itself may be impacting upon officers' ability to do this. However, it should be noted that we were unable to determine how widespread

this issue is, and the overall impact this has on the delivery of neighbourhood policing. A related issue appears to be a reluctance for officers to use public transport, further exacerbating the problem.

Resourcing was also found to impact upon perceptions of officer safety, with lack of personal protective equipment being highlighted as a concern at PCSO and PC level. This meant that officers reported feeling at risk in the community, especially as reduced personnel meant that officers more frequently patrolled solo. PCSOs indicated that this directly impacted on their ability to challenge crime and ASB when patrolling, as a lack of support in the form of PPE or additional officers made dealing with groups of people or patrolling tower blocks much more risky.

Changes to neighbourhood policing brought about by the pandemic also demonstrated a resourcing issue, with ward panel meetings moving online via Zoom. Officers and SNBs identified that MPS-issued IT did not permit the use of Zoom for meetings, with Teams the preferred software. This meant officers were often using their own technology to attend meetings or struggling to attend regularly. The lack of appropriate technology also appears to be hampering Neighbourhood staff being readily contactable by their communities and picking up at earliest opportunity community tensions via social media. For instance, one sergeant said,

> *'There are times when we've had warrants executed on a local estate, firearms warrants you know they've gone in and blown the doors off dragged people out we come into work the next day and don't know anything about it and the phone is ringing off the hook because the rumour has gone around that the police have shot someone and we've got to pick up the pieces and that is just through a bit of a lack of internal communication'* (SGT).

A further technological issue identified, was the lack of readily accessible performance data available for neighbourhood teams. Whilst this was available as a dashboard for other areas of the MPS, neighbourhood teams were not included within this programme. It is understood that this is in the pipeline for neighbourhood teams and this report would strongly support this.

6. **Training**

The need for both improved initial and enhanced further training for MPS officers in support of neighbourhood policing was identified by a number of the focus groups (PCSO, PC, INS) and also features in national discussions.

Initial police training, in common with all police forces in England and Wales, occurs as part of the CoP's Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) programme. The underlying curriculum and standards are determined by the CoP but forces are allowed a degree of flexibility in terms of local emphasis and delivery. However, 'neighbourhood policing' is not explicitly identified as 'key knowledge, skills and professional awareness' area within the PCDA whereas 'Evidence-based Policing' and 'Digital Policing' are. However, a number of our focus groups were also uncertain about both how much new recruits should be expected to know in terms of some of the fundamental concepts that underlie neighbourhood policing, such as problem-solving and community engagement (PC, SGT CINS). On focus group commented on

the need for training on how neighbourhood policing officers interact with members of the public following incidents, and what action is taken following these incidents (PCSO). There was a perception of some inconsistency in approach.

Concern was also expressed over the current practice of initial police officers ('probationers') acting as Ward Officers for a six-month period, leading to a rapid turnover and lack of continuity concerning neighbourhood policing personnel on BCUs (SGT). This links back to the points made in the previous section about the need for Neighbourhood officers to be a consistent presence in the community. An impression with one focus group (SGT) is that the MPS initial training focussed recruits '[…] *more on preparing you for response team than SNT'* (SGT).

In terms of post initial training, all ranks (PCSO, PC, SGT, INS, CINS) felt there was an unmet need for further training on both the 'theory and practice' of neighbourhood policing in the MPS, and this was seen by an interviewee in one focus group as a 'major failing'. In some cases, focus groups members believed that the amount and quality of training on neighbourhood policing in the MPS had actually declined in recent years (PCSO, CINS), and as far as some interviewees were concerned was now non-existent (PCSO). The online training provided by the College of Policing (NCALT) was viewed as inadequate by at least one interviewee (PCSO), suggesting that participants *'don't really learn anything'* and in more general terms the College has recently acknowledged this. Another said, *'I don't think we get the proper training'* (PCSO). One focus group interviewee even went so far as to describe the current DWO training as *'[…] a complete waste of time' (CINS)*.

This feedback is of concern given that the College of Policing issued guidelines for Chief Officers in January 2021 that police officers, staff and volunteers involved in neighbourhood policing should be 'supported and equipped' and receive training and CPD in 'community engagement, partnership working, prevention, problem solving and procedural justice'. For example, many of the interviewees, at all ranks, were unaware of some of the commonly accepted neighbourhood policing principles and methods, such as Problem-Oriented Policing, SARA and 'VOLT' analysis.

Some specific training needs amongst neighbourhood policing officers was also identified by focus groups (PCSO, PC) including public order training, driving courses and use of TASER.

7. **Conclusions**

The original concept of neighbourhood policing has evolved in the MPS over the past twenty years, most obviously in terms the resourcing model. This is unsurprising, given the demands of austerity and the broader evolution of policing and society. Running in parallel, we found that training of neighbourhoods' officers has effectively ceased. Further what was once verging towards a specialism (by virtue of a) the dedicated two-week long course teaching specific policing techniques; and b) the ring-fencing of neighbourhood policing creating dedicated staff) has evolved into a generalism. This was further emphasised all by focus groups in relation to the perceived growth of the neighbourhood policing 'mission' to include a multitude of other tasks – the phrase 'dumping ground' was used repeatedly – and the regular abstractions to support other policing functions.

We were surprised that all the focus groups highlighted a lack of resources, particularly having to use their own devices to conduct virtual community meetings; the lack of personal issue

mobile phones to enable their communities to make direct contact; the lack of vehicles to compensate for the closure of satellite bases.

However, the greatest concern was differing understanding of the concept of neighbourhood policing expressed across our focus groups. The PCSOs offered the greatest certainty of what they believed neighbourhood policing to be about – 'engagement', 'eyes and ears of the Met' and similar phrases were employed. Their views appear to echo the original concept on neighbourhood policing the strongest which might be because their role has evolved the least over the past 20 years. The views of the PCSOs were matched by the Safer Neighbourhood Board Chairs. However, increasing uncertainty about the concept of neighbourhood policing and respective roles was witnessed as we interviewed the different ranks. This was most strongly evident in the Chief Inspector / Superintendent focus group. The focus groups revealed a tangible sense of multiple and at times conflicting priorities that had the danger of deflecting staff from whatever interpretation of neighbourhood policing that they had formed.

It is clear that the focus groups represented a body of professional officers dedicated to the service of their community. It was equally clear that they were unsure in what form that service should take – or at least whether the form which they believed it should take was the same as their line managers or the service more broadly. Given the perceived crisis in legitimacy facing the MPS, the need to ensure it has a clear definition of neighbourhood policing, of which all staff (not just in the Neighbourhood Strand) are cognisant and focused upon appears paramount.

8. **Recommendations**

As a result of this research, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: That the MPS defines its concept of neighbourhood policing, in partnership with stakeholders in Greater London and in the context of the national understanding of this policing function (e.g. the CoP).

Recommendation 2: Review the role of ward panels, how priorities are set (including the representation of the public on ward panels), and how success is monitored and measured.

Recommendation 3: That the MPS maintains accurate data on the number, duration and frequency of abstractions, and how this affect routine neighbourhood policing deployment.

Recommendation 4: The MPS should revisit the decision to deny access to Tasers for neighbourhood officers and review the PPE PCSOs are permitted to carry.

Recommendation 5: The MPS should assess the distances travelled by ward officers to their wards and the methods of travel they are using.

Recommendation 6: Consider moving ward panel meetings to MS Teams and equip panel members with the relevant technology.

Recommendation 7: Establish what training on 'neighbourhood policing' is currently offered to MPS police officers and staff, how this is delivered and accessed.